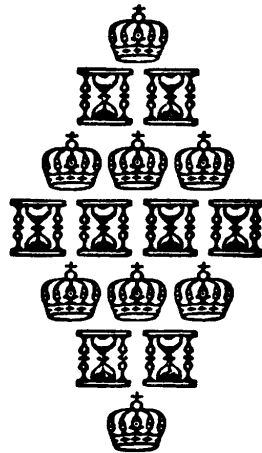


°
Early Days
on
BOSTON COMMON

By
Mary Farwell Ayer

With many Illustrations after Old Prints



BOSTON
Privately Printed

1910

VI

AFTER the close of the war the town of Boston grew rapidly,—so rapidly, in fact, that in 1784 a movement was set on foot to procure a city charter. This, however, met with opposition, and although the question was agitated from time to time, thirty years elapsed before a charter was finally granted.¹ With this increase in population it was found necessary to divide the town into districts, and in 1792 Boston was divided into nine wards. A few weeks later three more wards were added to those already laid out.²

Many new plans for the betterment of the town were soon adopted. In order to improve the appearance of Beacon Hill the old beacon was replaced by a granite pillar surmounted by an eagle. The present beacon is a copy, but the bronze tablets which are seen to-day on each of the four sides were taken from the original beacon.³

An elaborate plan for improving the Common was made, the expense of which was to be defrayed largely by public subscription.⁴ The mall was to consist of “three ranges of elm-trees, fenced in on the outer and inner sides: the old mall to be new gravelled and rolled. A single range of elms on the southern extremity to extend round nearly to the water; and on the northern another range to extend several rods beyond his Excellency’s.⁵ A grove to be planted round the pond, near the centre of the Common, and several other beneficial improvements made.”⁶

It occurred to a certain Mr. Billings that there undoubtedly existed good wells in the Common. His suspicions proving correct, the selectmen granted him permission to put pumps down, “provided the charge of the same is defrayed by private subscription.”⁷

¹ *The Independent Ledger*, May 10, 1784. ² It was at this time that the streets were first lighted by lamps. ³ The eagle which surmounted the original beacon is now ensconced above the Speaker’s Chair in the House of Representatives. ⁴ £285. 14s. 7d. was spent on improvements. *Mass. Centinel*, March 30, 1785. ⁵ The residence of John Hancock. ⁶ *The Mass. Spy*, August 26, 1784. The old entrance gates were not replaced until 1794. ⁷ The selectmen did not object to granting privileges, as long as no injury to the Common would result. In 1793 they granted per-

Early Days on Boston Common

Although the low marshy land at the foot of the Common, on which ropewalks were placed in 1794, still seemed remote, other parts of the Common were brought more in contact with town life.¹ Along one side of the Common was located the wood and lumber market, which, according to the new law of 1784, was to extend "from the granary south to the end of the Common." Houses of entertainment soon appeared in close proximity. In 1785 Mr. Eaton's Musick Gallery was erected near the mall.² At the foot of the mall appeared the Pantheon (a riding-school), which disapproving critics declared was surpassed in appearance by many a barn. A third building, the Columbian Museum, which stood at the head of the Common, was famous for its exhibition of waxworks. During week-days these houses were very popular. On warm Sunday evenings, however, when such entertainments were debarred, ladies and gentlemen of fashion would often wend their way to the Common, and spend many a pleasant hour walking and chatting in the malls.³

The Common was sometimes filled with the spectators who came to witness the drilling of troops on the parade-ground. Here the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, the oldest military order in the United States, held its annual meetings for the election of officers. Here in October, 1786, a throng gathered on the anniversary of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis to watch the new company of Independent Cadets on its first public appearance. This

mission to a petitioner asking leave to exhibit a camera obscura beneath the trees. They refused, however, to grant a petition for land on which to train cavalry horses.

¹ Occasionally we read of foot-races taking place along the Charles Street Mall.

² "Mall" and "Common" were apparently used indiscriminately.

³ On one occasion very few seem to have taken part in this promenade. An onlooker wrote: "In the evening very few were in the Mall, though we fear some were disappointed of their customary tour to that frequented place, upon account of a severe gust of wind. That many of the fair were detained from principle and not the weather we are induced to believe is the cause, and that the happiness of our females is built upon a foundation more permanent than wind. We, however, commiserate the disappointment of some, and with the next Sunday may afford some gentler relaxation from divine service." *Mass. Centinel.*

It was doubtless in the same part of the Common where, as early as 1749, three hundred women celebrated the fourth anniversary of the Society for Promoting Industry and Frugality by bringing their spinning-wheels and spinning to the accompaniment of music.

Early Days on Boston Common

company had marched from Faneuil Hall to the Common, attended by “drums, fifes, and a complete Band of Musick, all in exact uniform.”¹

Another celebration occurred here at the adoption of the Federal Constitution by Massachusetts. The inhabitants were awakened at early dawn by the church bells, which continued to ring at intervals throughout the day. A procession was formed, which passed by the houses of those representing Boston in the convention. As each house was reached, its owner was loudly cheered. “In the evening, a Long-Boat, call’d the Old Confederation, in the stern of which was elevated a Lanthorn two feet square, was drag’d through the principal streets in town and then into the Common, where, being deem’d unfit for further service, was ordered to be burnt, which was accordingly done, accompanied by the repeated huzzas of the people.”²

Due respect was paid this year to the ever memorable Fourth by an oration in the Old South Church delivered by Harrison Gray Otis. This was followed by a review of troops on the Common. The day was made especially memorable by the arrival of the news that Virginia had adopted the Constitution. Bells were rung with renewed vigor, in the evening the sky became ablaze with rockets, and a number of enthusiastic citizens brought the celebration to a close by parading through the streets with lighted candles.³

With the inauguration of George Washington as first President, the new government may be said to be fairly organized. As soon as affairs of office would permit, the President made a tour of the different states. Towards the end of October information was received that Washington expected to arrive in Boston on the following Saturday. When the day arrived, “at ten o’clock the inhabitants assembled and formed their Procession in the Mall—from whence, preceded by the Band of his Most Christian Majesty’s squadron—they proceeded to the Fortification—where his Excellency the

¹ *The Boston Gazette*, October 23, 1786.

² *Ibid.*, Feb. 11, 1788.

³ *Ibid.*, July 7, 1788.

Early Days on Boston Common

Governour had previously ordered the several military corps of this metropolis to parade.”¹

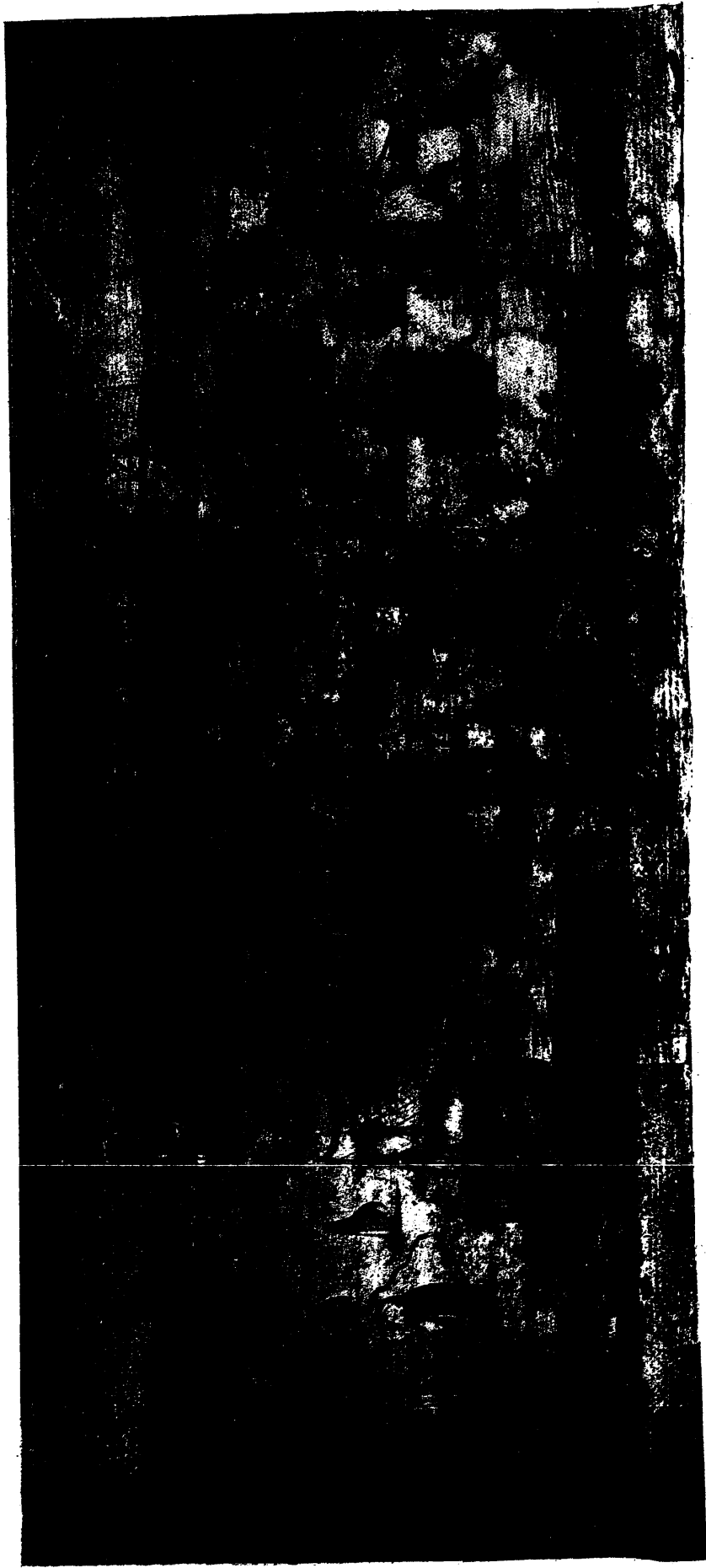
While the colonies were endeavoring to place a republican form of government on a firm footing, the French nation was attempting to follow in our footsteps and do away with monarchy. America showed great sympathy for the revolutionists and took pains to celebrate their victories on this side of the water in a fitting way. In February, 1793, a special holiday was appointed in Massachusetts, and in Boston the stores were closed after twelve o'clock, in order that all might join in the procession which passed through the town. The following year the inhabitants celebrated the destruction of the Bastille, and in 1795 showed by a special fête their pleasure at the successes of the Dutch allies and at the abolition of the French monarchy.

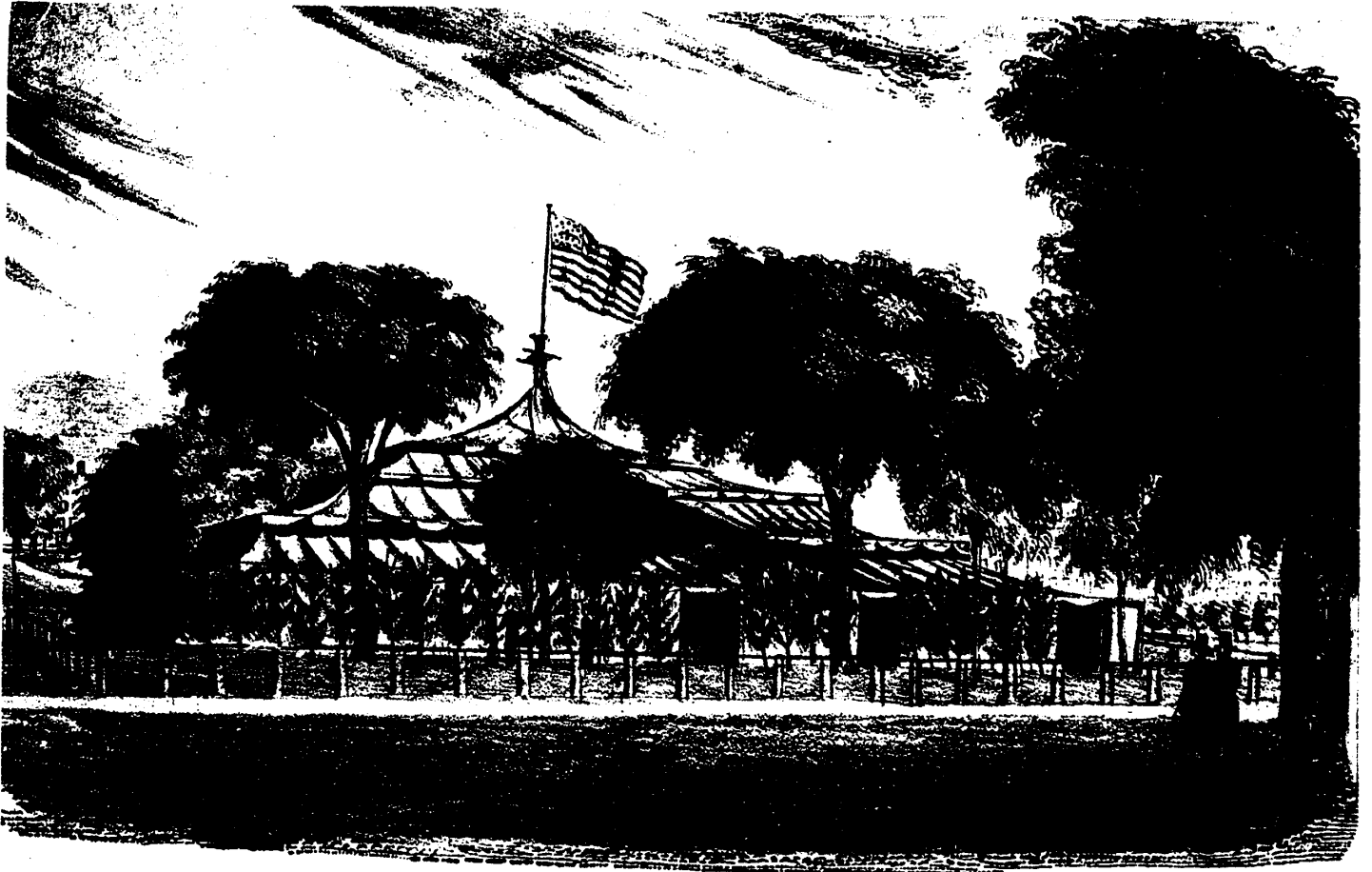
In the midst of the celebration of these French victories occurred the death of one of Boston's public benefactors, John Hancock, a man who had been a leader in all affairs concerning the colonies since the outbreak of the Revolution. On October 14 the inhabitants escorted the remains of their former governor to the Granary Burial-Ground. “The procession moved at 2 o'clock, from the Mansion House of the late Governor Hancock ; around the Common—and down Frog Lane, (Boylston Street) to Liberty Pole; through the Main-Street—and round the State-House—up Court Street—and from thence to the Place of Interment.”²

The mansion house of Governor Hancock stood on the slope of Beacon Hill. This land, although practically separate ground, was sometimes spoken of as a part of the Common. We find it referred to in this way on the occasion of the laying of the corner-stone of the new state house. “After the Oration,” writes a newspaper correspondent, “His Excellency the Governor, attended by the Military, several Lodges of

¹ *Mass. Centinel*, Oct. 28, 1789.

² *The Mercury*, Oct. 15, 1793. In June, 1797, Increase Sumner went to Boston to qualify for the office of governor. A large number of citizens, in carriages and on horseback, assembled in the Common, and proceeded to Roxbury to escort His Honor to town. *Independent Chronicle*, June 5, 1797.





WHIG PAVILION.

BOSTON COMMON. JULY 4th 1834.

Early Days on Boston Common

Free Masons in their Habits, the Municipal Officers of the Town, the Rev. Clergy, Magistrates, Strangers, and a vast concourse of Inhabitants proceeded to the Common, where his Excellency, assisted by the Free Masons, laid the Corner Stone of the new State House now erecting in this Town.”¹

Early views show us the State House standing on top of an unploughed hill with steep shelving sides. A flight of steps led up to it from Beacon Street, for to climb the grassy slopes meant an arduous scramble. The work of grading the hill was carried on gradually, until it was brought down to the present level. Buildings have so encroached on all sides that there is little left at present to remind us in any way of the original Beacon Hill.²

¹ *The Boston Gazette and Republican Weekly Journal*, July 6, 1795.

² Many climbed to the cupola on the State House for the sake of the magnificent view obtained. In July, 1843, there were 5319 persons. The following description of the Common as it appeared in 1794 is taken from the *Mass. Historical Society Collections*, vol. 3, page 243: “The Common is a spacious square level spot of ground, below Beacon hill, and to the east of it. It contains about forty-five acres, and is a fine grazing pasture for the town’s cattle. On days of publick festivity, the militia and military corps repair to the Common for the purposes of parading and performing their military manœuvres. On such occasions it is thronged with all ranks of the citizens. The lower classes divert themselves with such pastimes as suit their particular inclinations. A number of tents or temporary booths are put up, and furnished with food and liquor for those who require refreshment and can pay for it.

“The Mall is on the eastern side of the Common, in length one thousand four hundred and ten feet, divided into two walks parallel to each other; separated by a row of trees. On the outside of each walk is also a row of trees which agreeably shade them. The inhabitants of the town resort thither in the morning and evening of the warm seasons of the year, for the benefit of fresh air and a pleasant walk. It is fanned with refreshing breezes from a part of Charles river, which extends round the bottom of the Common. From the Mall is a pleasing prospect over the river, of the adjacent country.”